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ABSTRACT

Decentralization in the Memphis schools has succeeded in creating a closer working relationship between the administration and the schools. In the Central Area, the administration is made up of assistant (area) superintendents, instructional consultants, and principals. Although area superintendents are members of the superintendent's staff and participate in systemwide deliberation, they spend most of their time working directly with the schools. The instructional consultants link with principals, teachers, and area superintendents and can take information up and down the administrative ladder. Total staff involvement at the administrative level takes place with regular meetings between the instructional consultants and the area superintendents, between groups of principals and the superintendents, and between individual principals and superintendents and consultants. Involvement at the school level is presented in a description of the adoption of a minimum skills program. The program is marked by active flow of information from teachers to consultants and principals and in the other direction. Communication was increased within and between schools as a result of the program. (Author/IRT)

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PRESENTER: Joseph W. Westbrook, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Memphis, Tennessee

TOPIC: Total Staff Involvement in Curriculum Decision Making
TIME: Monday, February 28, 10:00 a.m. 1977
PLACE: Room A-4, Convention Center
PROGRAM: Page 94

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Administrative decentralization has succeeded in the accomplishment of one of its goals, creating a closer working relationship between administration and the schools. In the centralized system, ofttimes principals needed advice, support or directions in crucial decision matters which only the superintendent could give. At such crucial times it was difficult for one person to be available to some one hundred sixty principals. Currently there are four persons, with some 35 or 40 principals responsible to each of them, who are charged with the responsibility of providing these as well as other services to principals and their staffs.

Included in the responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the schools was the charge to work for the improvement of these operations as they related to community involvement, pupil services relating to discipline and attendance, instruction, administrative planning and pupil achievement. The Area Offices are staffed with personnel to facilitate these functions.

An examination of the organizational chart of the Memphis City Schools will reveal how these responsibilities are carried out and how, under such an organization, total staff involvement in change may be more of a reality than in a more encompassing structure.

Overlay No. 1 - Organizational chart showing superintendent, deputies, assistants, etc.

The deputies for instructional services and business affairs along with their staffs form the supporting service arms of the system. They participate in and make decisions affecting system-wide matters. The

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deputy superintendents serve as the superintendent's cabinet. The executive deputy is the operational officer. As you see, through him the area superintendents bear direct responsibility for school operations.

While the area superintendents are members of the superintendent's staff and participate in deliberations of system-wide or global problems, their major responsibility allows them to spend most of their time and energies working directly with the schools.

The instructional consultants, shown on the chart, constitute an important group of people. Note their relationships to the principals and teachers. Their major responsibility is working directly with principals and teachers to improve instruction. It is this linkage that actualizes total staff involvement in change. A reversible conduit is formed among the area superintendent, the consultant, the principal and the teacher. Direct linkages exist between the consultant and teachers, between the consultant and principals and between the consultant and area superintendent. This same direct linkage is present between principals and area superintendents.

Total staff involvement is achieved in a variety of ways in the Central Area. First, there are regular meetings between the instructional consultants, who spend approximately 80% of their time in the schools, and the area superintendent. Instructional and curriculum problems, ideas and plans are discussed, research carried out and various means of implementation are developed by this staff. It is our position that we should generate ideas and develop alternatives that are challenging to teachers and principals. We view ourselves as catalysts for innovation and change. We also function as explorers of possible alternatives to innovation and change either to overcome a problem or bring about improvements where desired. We are the idea people. Consultants also get ideas, suggestions and requests for new courses or curriculum revisions directly from the teachers with whom they work.

Secondly, principals meet with the area superintendent after each report card period. Senior high principals usually meet at one of the schools, junior high and elementary principals generally meet in the area office. Senior and junior high school report card periods cover six weeks while elementary school reports go to parents each nine weeks. These meetings deal specifically with the principal as the instructional leader in the school. The instructional successes and failures, innovations and changes, curriculum needs and the principals' activities in these areas during that report card period are discussed and critiqued. The principals share ideas and formulate plans to carry back to their staffs. The numbers of persons at each meeting are nine senior high (six regular and three special schools), nine junior high and twenty-two elementary principals. The elementary principals are divided into two groups to facilitate dialogue. This grouping changes with each meeting. These meetings began by asking principals to submit specific job tasks relating to specific goals and objectives. Note memo - 9/74. This activity encouraged their thinking beyond the routine tasks. Planning for change and instructional leadership by the principals were our goals for these early sessions.

Thirdly, individual principals are encouraged and do meet with the area superintendent and/or the consultants to discuss ideas for innovative programs in their schools. Freedom to initiate change and try out different ideas permeates the area. It is our conviction that the building principal is the focus of successful change and instructional improvement in the schools. That person must understand and accept the basic concept that the principal is and must be the instructional leader in the various schools. "Leader" is emphasized - not proscriber or authoritarian director. Teachers must be involved in planning their instructional programs. The success or failure of any program, idea or concept is related directly to acceptance and involvement at the building level. Many seemingly good ideas or

innovations have died just outside the classroom teachers' doors or outside of the school building. We feel that the chronicle of events detailed had the proper mix of leadership and involvement to insure their success.

Let us look at an idea that was developed into an area-wide program at the elementary and junior high levels. The idea grew out of a continuing concern for the lack of achievement among large numbers of students, which resulted in many youngsters entering the seventh grade without the skills necessary for success at that level. As with students nationwide, these youngsters were deficient in reading, language arts and mathematics. Like other systems, Memphis has utilized federal funds in the implementation of reading programs, mathematics programs and other activities designed to help the underachieving students. Local funds have been used to staff a reading center whose basic responsibility is to improve reading through teacher training and through selection of materials appropriate for children's reading levels.

While all of these efforts produced some positive results, the overall problem still persisted. The elementary consultants, during a series of sessions with this administrator, came up with the idea of concentrating in the areas of reading, language and math. Crucial to these discussions was to what extent the elementary curriculum could or should be changed in order to provide for greater emphasis and time on these skill subjects. Selected elementary principals were invited to bring one or two of their teachers to a meeting in the area office to discuss the idea. Their reactions were quite favorable. Subsequent meetings between these teachers and the consultants resulted in the initiation on a pilot basis of "The Minimum Skills" program of the Central Area. The concept of minimum skills embraced the identification of certain skills in reading, language

and math that students must master in order to move from grade six. These were minimum skills youngsters would need to function at the seventh grade level.

The chart - overlay No. 2 shows some of these minimum skills.

The identification and targeting of mastery of these skills pinpointed teaching goals for teachers. They could identify the progress their children were making through simple assessment procedures and checklists - (show checklist). Very favorable results were reported to all Central Area elementary principals. Some liked the idea and were ready to take it back to their teachers. Others, especially those where a majority of their students were already achieving above these minimums, expressed reservations. Dialogue brought out the concept of teaching for skills with teachers in each school determining the skills levels above the minimum their students should reach. Also, individual school staffs would make decisions regarding curriculum changes that would be necessary to incorporate the minimum skills concepts into their programs. It was generally accepted that elementary schools in the Central Area would embrace the "Minimum Skills" program beginning with the 1974-75 school year. This was approved by the superintendent's staff.

Schools presented different formats for accomplishing the minimum skills. Some incorporated the teaching of the skills into their regular procedures while others designed special activities and schedules.

Gordon overlay and one or two others (Expand).

Schools reported in 1975 and 1976 that most youngsters moving from grade six had mastered the minimum skills. Some problems still exist for those youngsters on the border line. Principals, parents and teachers must determine what seems best for the individual child. That is, in

cases where a youngster has not mastered the minimum skills, other factors such as age, physical maturity and emotional impact must be considered in deciding whether or not to retain the student. Decisions are made on an individual basis.

This brings us to the next phase of involvement. During the spring semester, senior high principals meet with junior high principals of feeder schools and junior high principals met with elementary principals of their feeder schools. These series of meetings are scheduled and arranged by the senior and junior high principals with the accepted understanding that junior high and elementary principals will attend. Beginning in 1975 the minimum skills project provided a specific agenda for the junior high and elementary principals' meetings. All facets of student transition and inter-school working relationships are discussed in these meetings. The border-line achievers are discussed and some determination made as to where their needs can best be met during the ensuing year. Overlay - 5/5/75 memo. As a result of these meetings the following memo was circulated. Likewise, sixth grade teachers meet with seventh grade teachers in the receiving junior high schools. These series of meetings are beginning to develop closer instructional linkages among the elementary and junior high teachers as they relate to students' needs, strengths and weaknesses. Although statistical analyses have not been made, junior high principals report that incoming seventh graders have shown definite improvement in skills mastery for the last two years.

The elementary-junior high linkage enabled us to introduce the concept of minimum skills at the junior high level in the major academic areas: English/language arts, mathematics, social studies and science. The discussions were initiated with the four secondary instructional consultants. In-depth exploration took place during a series of meetings with these persons. When the concepts were pretty well formulated with the consultants, they were presented to the junior high principals at a

meeting where the consultants were present. Again, in-depth discussions, questioning and idea refinement took place between the principals and consultants.

The principals carried the concepts and plans for development back to their respective faculties. All schools agreed to participate in the planning phase. This is where we feel that total involvement was achieved. As you will see, every teacher who was going to be affected had the opportunity to participate in the development process and make decisions regarding what was to be included.

The teachers in each school, by subject area grouping, i.e., English - language arts, mathematics, science and social studies, selected one of their members to work with the respective instructional consultant in developing the "minimum skills" for that particular subject area, grades seven through nine. Suggestions and ideas flowed from teachers in the schools to the committee of teachers and consultants. The materials developed were carried back to the individual faculties for review, suggested changes, etc., following each meeting. The committees met and worked regularly for some four or five months.

What was viewed as a very simple and quick task by one consultant, for example, turned out to be a very involved one. There were very beneficial spin-offs at the individual school levels because of this process. One example was, teachers of the same subject at the same grade level in one school did not know what the others were doing. Having to discuss and develop proposed skills at the school level created a closer, more cooperative working relationship among teachers.

The consultants reported back to the principals in late April. Most of the day was spent examining and discussing what the committees had done.

The overlay represents a part of the language arts and mathematics skills, along with part of the mathematics pretest.

The principals carried the materials back to their faculties. Each was charged with the responsibility of having the faculty develop its plans for implementation of the minimum skills program. The ultimate goal is that the minimum levels will be on par with the grade levels, hence the skills are reevaluated and revised where necessary each year.

This memo 9/3/75 - overlay No. 3 to principals illustrates how the emphasis for program development was placed at the individual school level. It is our firm conviction that meaningful change must be developed at the local school level.

We are currently in the second year of the junior high program. As with the elementary schools, each junior high school is pursuing its own course regarding the integration of the minimum skills concept into its program. Principals, individually, are called upon to report how the minimum skills concept was presented by their teachers during the previous six or nine-week period. These reports must be specific. Thus, some evaluation of participating is accomplished at regular intervals during the year. Consultants are also involved with their teachers on an almost daily basis and make progress reports on the schools.

We feel that our role was fulfilled because each school and its faculty had to take an in depth look at the instructional program and processes in operation. Intra- as well as interfaculty communication was generated. These communications centered around a specific point and an identified objective. Thus, the administrative office created an environment and served as a catalyst for change and innovation at the individual school level.